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STORAGE

Mt. Eisenhower

and other poems

Elizabeth Garbutt

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Garbutt, Elizabeth

Mt. Eisenhower, and other poems.

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Mt. Eisenhower

and other poems

Elizabeth Garbutt

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CONTENTS

Mount Eisenhower	3
Cathedral Mountain	4
Night Shall Not Fall	5
Steel	6
The Young Pilot	7
To One Who Died In 1918	8
Churchill	9
A Barren Gain	10
Warning All Airmen	11
Birds and Aeroplanes	12
Mirage — The Passing West	13
Alberta	14
Time and Tumbleweed	16
Grain Elevators	17
The Homestead	18
Dust	19
A Prairie Dust Storm	20
Pioneer Days	21
The Indians Are Going West	22
Sanctuary	23
December Thirty-First	24
Sunset	25
No Chance To Count The Stars	26
Muscums Of The Deep	27
An Easter Thought	28
Out Of Work	29
Smoke	30
Life's Pause	31
The Lost Youth	32
Hope	33
The Cycle	34
Foot-Loose	35
Moths	36
Star Dust	37
Youth's Philosophy	38
Time and Eternity	39
The Poet's Prayer	40

MOUNT EISENHOWER

From fiery chaos cast, in some long-lost
And dim majestic past, Mount Eisenhower stands,
Immovable and vast in castled stone.

Its granite peaks have seen wild aeons flee;
In every dark ravine is hidden history;
Yet lofty and serene it sees Time pass.

It is a fitting gift for one who used
God-given strength to lift our countries' welded might
Above defeat and swift oblivion.

It is a symbol too of nations' trust,
Of hope that somehow through our unarmed boundary,
World peace may yet ensue, and war shall cease.

(In 1946 the government of the Dominion of
Canada changed the name of Castle Mt. to Mt.
Eisenhower and presented it to the Allied Com-
mander-in-Chief.)

CATHEDRAL MOUNTAIN

It stands amid impassive solitude,
A master Architect's triumphant dream;
Its purple wings of vivid shadows brood
In benediction over hill and stream;
Its massive towers stab the virgin blue
With spires of snow, while far below there lies,
In cloistral calm, a lake of jade-green hue
Reflecting lonely rock and lonely skies.

The Unknown God's cathedral hewn in stone—
From pediment to crypt in dark abyss
It scorns trite, empty rites, and creed out-grown.
No temple to the little gods is this,
But a tall tabernacle, austere, vast,
Flung skyward by the great Iconoclast.

NIGHT SHALL NOT FALL

Upon the lofty mountain tops, the night
Does not descend. From valleys far below
The dark comes creeping up to meet the light
Which lingers on the peaks of unreached snow.
The mountain climber is the only one
Who knows how long delayed the dusk may be.
Or sees, on topmost pinnacles, the sun
With glory crown the day triumphantly.

When I have climbed the last, lone peak, where we
Must come but once, and each must come alone,
I shall not fear the night that stealthily
Is moving up to cover scree and stone;
For in the stillness on that lonely height,
I know that I shall see the After Light.

STEEL

I was the shining rails
Which carried the pioneer
To the land of his dreams
At the end of the steel.
I was the axe which felled
The trees to build his home,
And feed his hearth.
I was the ploughshare
That tilled his soil,
And I, the spade which turned
The waiting sod to place him
At rest, when all his dreams
Were ended.

Today, I am the bayonet,
And the guns shouldered by
The sons of that pioneer.
I am the fangs
In the jaws of War,
The sharpened teeth
In the hungry mouth of Death:
I am the blood-stained nails
In a crumbling Cross

THE YOUNG PILOT

With shining courage, cautionless, away
He flew. The sorrows of Gethsemane,
The heart-wrung cry, "Hast Thou forsaken me?",
Were crowded in the brief communique,
"Regret to say—" I grieved that one so gay
Should be an aching flash of memory;
That he—so true, all men seemed true—could be
A soundless ghost far off from all Today.

Rejoice! With all the universe attune,
Beyond this earth, his spirit knows no night,
But, soaring, skirts the margin of the moon
To race with shooting stars. Outspeeding light,
Past death he winged, with Godhead to commune,
The ultimate embodiment of flight.

TO ONE WHO DIED IN 1918

Along the years unthinking people said
That you and all your comrades died in vain;
That all the blood and sacrificial pain
Had brought no peace, but discord in its stead;
That nothing good could be attributed
To any war. Why should we fight again
When nothing had been won by all the slain?
Why grasp the shackles shaken by the dead?

You kept the Truth alive, because you won
Your children's generation liberty
Of mind, freedom from fear, the right to grow
In gentleness, and speak aloud. Your son,
Though prisoned at Dieppe, is far more free
Than his thought-regimented, muzzled foe.

CHURCHILL

Remembering the gallant Christ who led
His men to Calvary, where there was no
Retreat, you too, when even hope seemed dead,
Courageously have called upon your world to show
Its faith in things unseen, a God unknown.
You promised blood, and sweat, and toil, and tears,
And that we'd fight till death, and fight alone;
But suddenly we rose above our fears.

The kingdom of the spirit was the Grail
You showed; and we, who caught a fleeting glance
Of freedoms yet to be, surged on to scale
The heights to our divine inheritance.
You taught us in the cause of liberty
To dare to die, like Christ, triumphantly.

A BARREN GAIN

Six hundred years have passed since Bacon taught
That some day man, through conquered air, would fly.
Four centuries ago Da Vinci caught
The gleam, and pictured ships to cleave the sky.
Men's minds have soared, at oneness with the birds,
These countless years, some heaven to attain;
But in the end have found, O bitter words,
In all the sky's immensity, no gain.

While bombs are whining through the shattered sky
No birds can sing. The shadow and the shroud
Hung dark above the shambles of Shanghai
When pestilence came raining from a cloud.
The dreamers of the past, unwittingly,
Increased the sum of human misery.

WARNING ALL AIRMEN

Far out of Time you fly,
Where old day-dreams wing free
With hopes that soared too high.

You'll find, off in the blue,
Keats' nightingale, and planes
That Leonardo drew;

The beauty artists lost;
The song that died unsung;
The love-ship once storm tossed.

The castles in the air,
Unseen, obstruct your flight
By lurking everywhere.

Mistakenly you deem
A Gremlin changed your course:
You only bumped a Dream.

BIRDS and AEROPLANES

What is the birds' reaction to
A noisy plane in flight?
Do they think it a super-bird?
Or headlong meteorite?

Do birds suppose the plane to be
A droning dragonfly?
A stork with doubtful blessing sent?
Or lost soul shrieking by?

Can it be Jove turned swan again?
A phoenix sprung from fire?
Or just a streamlined motor car
Disguised in bird attire?

What do the little bird folk think
When they see airplanes fly
On plucked and awkward pinions through
The clean and endless sky?

MIRAGE — THE PASSING WEST

Tall poplars shiver in the summer heat;
Dim ghosts of red men sit
On ponies silently.
They shade far-seeing eyes
With tawny hands, and gaze into the West.

A shaggy line of bison tramps across
The dusty prairie sage;
And soon Red River carts
Are seen, log shacks, and scarlet uniforms;

Great herds of cattle pass; then glint of ploughs,
The waving wheat, and smoke
Of trains. The Indians
Have ridden, ghost-like by;
And poplar trees are shivering in the heat.

ALBERTA

Alberta, province of varied moods!
 A North where Time
 All winter seems to hibernate
 To escape the crackle
 Of a land contracting
 Under cold;
 Where skies in spring
 Are magical with song
 Of migratory birds come home;
 And summer is a miracle
 Of growth

A South grey-green with sage,
 Where shepherds follow flocks,
 And unprotected cattle roam
 All year across
 The cactus-dotted plains;
 Where flaming tapers silhouette
 Oil derricks and storage tanks
 Against the northern lights.
 And in between the North and South
 Millions of acres lie
 Yellow with grain.

Alberta! land of the blizzard
 And soft chinook! of glacial springs.
 And sun-baked alkali sloughs!
 Of piebald ponies
 And stream-lined automobiles!
 Of grain elevators and railway stations,
 Unnamed lakes and unclimbed peaks!
 Where aeroplanes drone
 Above thronged cities,
 And loons laugh mockingly
 Over remote homesteads!
 Home of royal rancher
 And smoke-scented Indian!

Westward the Rockies rise
In jagged outlines,—
The giant script
Where God has placed
His signature
Upon this masterpiece—
ALBERTA.

TIME and TUMBLEWEED

Your homesteads carve from prairie land
Where bison used to roam,
Forgetting that a people once
Call Nineveh their home.

Uproot the weed and willow brush,
Cut down the poplar trees;
Remember not the ancient doom
Of Ur of the Chaldees.

Impregnable your cities build,
A vast new empire found;
And think not Tyre and Sidon are
But sand-enshrouded ground.

Your steel-clad Babels rear on high,
Your citadels build strong;
But hark! Till prairies close around
The time will not be long.

The myriad grass and grey sage brush
Shall hide your every deed,
Your giant cities lie beneath
Wild rose and tumbleweed.

GRAIN ELEVATORS

Like strange cathedrals
To a stranger god,
All bleakly grey
Against the evening sky,
The concrete towers stand.
Their walls are windowless,
As if the soul within
Were blind to all
The prairie world
Without, the while
Their cold walls reach
Toward the distant sky.

Then, one by one,
Around their base,
The little lamps of town
Flicker, like altar candles
Lighted silently
By votaries
Of the golden god,
The idol—WHEAT.

THE HOMESTEAD

Unsown, unreaped, of care bereft,
Clear-etched against a windless dawn,
I see the homestead that you left
When rain forsook Saskatchewan.

The empty windows of your home,
Like eyeless sockets, blindly stare
At twisted lines of furrowed loam
The winds have turned with their keen share.

Your acres are the burial ground
Where all your plans and hopes lie dead,
While Russian thistles blow around
The broken pump and sagging shed.

In spring, anemones again
Will bloom upon the prairie's breast,
And in the lonely, grass-grown lane
The meadow lark will build her nest.

The sun will shine, though you have gone,
On budding shrub and flaunting weed.
Naught but the land you walked upon
And loved, will your departure heed.

DUST

I am the plaything and the pawn
Of Fate. Wind-swept Saskatchewan
Has claimed my strength, my time, my toil,
Repaying me with dried-out soil;
And with her many-winded broom
Has made my life an empty room.
Gone are the hopes for which I built,
Lost in an acreage of silt;
I've learned that storms of dust may be
The way to man's Gethsemane.

But though I strive my doom to bear
With courage high, and dauntless air,
This thought remains to gall my mind —
The anti-climax of mankind—
That when I die, as die I must,
I, too, shall add to that loathed dust.

A PRAIRIE DUST STORM

"Ashes to ashes: Dust to Dust!"
The end of power, and love, and lust.
I often ask as the wind goes by,
"Whose dust is mixed with that wailing cry?"

And when from the West where Rockies stand
Like bleaching bones of a buried land,
A dust storm comes with its pall of gloom,
I wonder what host has left the tomb.

Have Indians taken their old war path
To vent on us some age-long wrath?
What cosmic urge or wild unrest
Has driven the dead from out of the west?

Do Titans battle again with Time?
Is this dust the end of a Force sublime?
Is it the Valkyr's battle cry
We hear as the wings of storm rush by?

From oblivion's dark immensity
Whose dust is fighting to be free,
As the ineffectual ghost of man
Has fought for freedom since time began?

PIONEER DAYS

There is no town like a prairie town
With youthful vigor on treeless ground,
As it lifts itself by taut boot-straps
From amber grain fields crowding around.

It has brick-faced banks and false front stores,
And stark elevators filled with wheat;
And a grimy station that squats like a crone
By the casual trail that turned to a street.

I used to live on a fenceless range
Where the bald-faced prairie seemed all my own.
Where eye could rove to the rainbow's end
Over virgin acres, unploughed, unsown.

But now — there's a blare of auto horns,
The droning airships cleave the night;
The winking glare of movie signs
Has dimmed the mystic Northern Light.

My sons say things are better now.
Perhaps they are, in many ways;
But my heart goes back on memory's trail
To the open range of bygone days.

THE INDIANS ARE GOING WEST

A weathered wagon creeps along
Our prairie town's main street,
With squaws and children crouching low
Behind the braves' high seat.

I wonder, as they westward drive,
Toward fields of yellow grain,
How many of their tribe recall
The bison-trodden plain.

Somewhere they'll leave the gravelled road
Where autos, flashing, pass,
And turn to where a lonesome trail
Lies dying in the grass.

They'll skirt a grove of sapling pine,
Where hawks wheel overhead,
And rattle down a steep incline
To cross an old creek bed;

Then struggle up the farther side,
The wheels all black with loam,
And with a flourish stop beside
The teepee they call "Home."

They'll sleep and dream of changing years
Beneath these changeless skies.
The Indians are going west,
With history in their eyes.

SANCTUARY

Across the drab, grey, winter skies
The wavering lines of birds come home
At dusk to Inglewood.

Tumultuous wings and honking cries
Are stilled. In peace the wild things roam
The paths of Inglewood.

May he who rules beyond the range
Of time and space, this boon provide
Uncompassed, lost mankind;

That souls which wing, remote and strange,
Across harsh skies, at eventide
Shall sanctuary find.

(Inglewood is a Federal Bird Sanctuary near Calgary, Alberta.)

DECEMBER THIRTY-FIRST

Time, an editor old and gray,
Has sent a paper to press today,
An annual record of joy and sorrow,
The ancient history of tomorrow.

And down the centuries' shadowed street
Go carrier boys on hurrying feet,
Each with his bundle of news to place
At the shuttered door of an unborn race.

When Earth is dead, and her orb, grown dim,
In an eyeless void shall darkly swim,
Will Time, in a distant, younger sphere,
Be editing news of a better year?

SUNSET

Loud sirens blow
At six o'clock;
Through factory doors
Gaunt figures stalk.

I rise and watch
With eager eye
To see my man
Come striding by.

Almost I hear
His whistled call
Resounding through
Our tiny hall.

Old habits prove
Too strong for me;
I turn away
Reluctantly.

No need to wait!
I shall not see
My own good man
Come home to me.

Long months ago
His work was done.
The dead come not
At set of sun.

NO CHANCE TO COUNT THE STARS

When Bob and me were little tads,
 At night Ma'd talk to us
 About the stars.
 There used to be
 A reddish one,
 That she called Mars,
 The Dipper, and the Little Bear,
 And heaps of others.

We'd stand beside the pasture bars,
 Our feet well buried
 In the warmish dust,
 And wish that we could count
 The stars that made
 The Milky Way.
 When we were scrubbing up
 Before we went to bed,
 (Ma liked to keep
 The sheets all clean)
 She'd say, "If you boys keep
 Your feet well rooted in the soil
 And eyes upon the stars,
 You can't go wrong."

Ma died. The dry years came.
 The soil just up and blew away.
 We drifted, Bob and me,
 Until one day we met
 Old Scarface Joe
 And robbed a bank.
 Bob shot a man.
 You see, we never stole
 Before, and he was scared.
 He stumbled, and the gun
 Went off.
 Bob died — the chair,
 And I got twenty years.

Behind these bars,
 My God, what chance have I
 To count the stars?

MUSEUMS OF THE DEEP

The gallant ships of long ago
Are anchored safe from tidal flow;
The under-currents of the seas
Museums are of centuries,
Where, in their keeping, may be scanned
More wondrous things than those on land

There Babylon's ancient quinquiremes
Rub hulls with modern submarines;
The great Armada's lying low
By ships of Drake and John Cabot,
Near golden galleons of Spain
That followed in Columbus' train.

There Lief the Lucky's viking mast
Finds port, all exploration past;
The figure-head from Jason's craft,
Brave Hudson's boat, lone Crusoe's raft,
The stout Revenge with the fifty-three
Are all shown there beneath the sea.

And down one fame-lit corridor,
A thousand ships from Grecian shore
By Helen launched against doomed Troy;
Nor time nor tide can these destroy,
Though mocking grin of eyeless skulls
Is seen amid their slimy hulls.

I'd like to wander through the room
Where ships of Tarshish pierce the gloom,
To see in aisles where time is not
The great fleets by the world forgot,
And, perhaps, a boat from Galilee
In the museums of the sea.

AN EASTER THOUGHT

When God from elemental Force
Had carved the glory of a world,
And Earth to its predestined place,
Among the fiery planets, whirled,

Through space Truth came, as comets come,
A blaze of radiance in its train;
It lit the pinnacles of Earth,
And reached to man's bewildered brain.

Primeval man but vaguely saw
A changing form, a flame by night,
A cloudy pillar in the day,
Elusive of his grasp and sight.

As time spun past, the torch grew dim—
A dying candle on a bier—
Until the splendour of a star
O'er Bethlehem brought dayspring near.

A few short years, in human form,
The Truth was known in Galilee.
Nor even then could men discern
The flaming of eternity.

When on the heights of Calvary
Three crosses loomed against the sky,
The light seemed lost to all the world.
But Truth and Beauty cannot die.

Death's immemorial bonds were rent;
A vivid challenge pierced the gloom;
Beyond man's destiny of dust
Truth shines—above an *empty* tomb.

OUT OF WORK

If Christ, the Carpenter, were here
With feelings such as men,
Yet with no sin, would He too fear
When winter came again?

Would He know fear for Mary's health
When all their food was spent,
And she was worried since they could
Not pay for coal and rent?

Would He too have no place whereon
To lay His weary head,
No manger such as Bethlehem
Gave him for natal bed?

Or if He went from door to door
With chairs that He had made,
Would our house-wives refuse with scorn
His meagre stock-in-trade?

And when He could not earn His bread,
Too proud for charity,
Would He be starved* in plenty's midst,
Or charged with vagrancy?

Would He be brave while asking work
With hungry, frozen breath,
If Christ should live in our town
Instead of Nazareth?

SMOKE

Long, long years past, in some forgotten way
A demon Force cast off the leash that bound
His hands, and with a wild, discordant sound
Upheaved the earth, and buried, that fell day,
A prehistoric land in still decay.
And now when, aeons gone, we mine for coal
We liberate the long-imprisoned soul
Of man from that volcanic rock and clay.

When nights are silver white, all calm and clear,
From every chimney-top within our sight
The ghosts of that lost race take silent flight.
"Only smoke clouds," we say as they appear.
We are too blind to see in wraiths of smoke
Primeval man freed from oblivion's yoke.

LIFE'S PAUSE

The sun-enamelled leaves months since
Have flown, and inarticulate,
Against the muted winter day,
A tree stands stark and desolate.

Its limbs are stretched like twisted arms
Athwart the sky. Torn wisps of cloud,
Like some lost wraith's grey flying hair
Unbound, wind-blown, its top enshroud.

Then suddenly a migrant bird
Sings joyously from that bare tree,
Proclaiming winter but a pause
In life that's been, and yet shall be.

THE LOST YOUTH

The country parents lost their child
Within the city walls,
And frantically they looked for him
Among the market stalls.

In streets and lanes and inn courtyards
They cried his name aloud;
Three age-long days and longer nights
They searched among the crowd;

Until, at last, they heard it said
A most amazing youth
Was with the rabbis where they sought
To find and teach the truth;

Was answering all questions asked,
In a disarming way;
And thus the parents found the son
They thought had gone astray.

When chided for alarming them,
He said, "I thought you knew
That I'd be here because I have
My Father's work to do."

But Mary wept for her eldest child,
So full of laughter and fun,
Wept, for in her heart she knew
His boyhood days were done.

HOPE

In the miracle morning of Youth,
On expectant feet I raced across
The meadows, led by Hope,
A bird which always hovered near.
Soon its rainbow hues were lost to sight,
But I could trace it by
The feathers dropped upon the fields of Time.
By noon, so seldom did I find
A pinion on my path to mountain heights,
I thought that I had dreamed
That Hope had been.

With stumbling feet I walk
The pathway winding down
To where the valley is gathering
The darkness again to its breast.
On backward-flying wings my memory roams
Among the wreckage of my life,
Seeking to salvage what it may.
Shall it find there the draggled plumes
And bleaching bones of what
I long have thought to be
A phantom bird?

Oh look! There is one feather
Bright of hue,
Drifting slowly
From the blue.

THE CYCLE

The ceaseless waves of Time
Forever beat
Upon Eternity's bleak shore;
We are the fragments
From sea-shattered rocks,
The broken fragments
Of austere Eternity.

The wash of waves,
The grinding mill of Time,
Has heaped us
On the shifting beach
Which men mistake for Life.
We have a space
To sun ourselves,
Until some hurricane
Shall drive us far ashore:
Full cycle come,
We merge once more
Into Eternity.

FOOT-LOOSE

A pair of shoes, mildewed, outworn,
Thrown on a rubbish heap!
While warily around the vamp
Exploring insects creep.

A spider weaves a web's gray woof
Across the dangling strings;
A pale moth flies demurely near
On soft ephemeral wings,

Like one foot-loose from other worlds—
Wise immortality
Come back to view life's shackles with
A gentle irony.

MOTHS

Like disembodied ghosts
Who seek the light,
The moths are flying near
My lamp tonight.

Upon their wings they bear
The dust of earth,
From whose drear maze they climbed
To their rebirth.

In through the broken dark
They silent came
To flutter madly 'round
This tiny flame.

When life shall be no more,
God grant that I
Find rest beneath the sod,
Nor wish to fly.

STAR DUST

When Love the bridle took,
And Passion seized the rein,
The sheltered roofs of Earth
Called to my youth in vain.

When Love went to the Moon,
And passion fled to Mars,
My heart came back to Earth
From racing with the stars.

But yet the star dust clings
To mud from flying hoofs.
Ah, God! Is wisdom found
On stars, — not under roofs?

YOUTH'S PHILOSOPHY

My mother said, "You cannot have
Your cake and eat it too."
I swallowed every crumb while hot;
Who likes stale cake? Do you?

I was so ill, I saved a cake,
Remembering mother's rule.
The mice ate all the frosting up
While I was off at school.

My love affairs are much like cake,
I find when in their toils;
One goes too fast and leaves me sick,
And one gets stale and spoils.

"Old friends, old books, old wines are best!"
Some day I'll learn that too,
But not till I am old, I hope.
Who likes stale cake? Do you?

TIME and ETERNITY

I was a busy prairie wife
So had to hustle all my life.
I scrubbed and dusted and cooked all day,
With never a moment for fun or play.
My husband, easy-going soul,
Would often argue or cajole:
“Why rush?” he’d say in accents mild,
“You’ve time enough.” He made me wild.

One day a sudden heart attack
Sent me upon another track.
My new-found wings seemed slow to me
As I flapped them quite impatiently
While hurrying to the heavenly gate,
Still fearing that I might be late.
Forgetting that we both were dead,
I could have killed Peter when he said,
In tones my husband used to me,
“Why rush? You’ve enough eternity.”

THE POET'S PRAYER

God grant I write
One perfect line,
One deathless thought
In words entwine,
Before I leave,
In silence deep
My rendezvous
With Death to keep.

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